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The “Value Added” of UN Peacekeeping

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UN peacekeeping is no miracle cure and there are no guarantees of success. But when properly mandated, resourced and managed, UN peacekeeping offers the best chance for a society emerging from violent conflict.

Peacekeeping is the front end of a complex, long-term process of helping conflicting parties create the necessary conditions — political, socio-economic, security — for sustainable peace.

At the centre of this effort is the peace process. Complex political problems always lie at the heart of violent conflict and require political solutions that are negotiated and agreed to by the parties. A capable security force will be essential in both the peace negotiation and implementation phases, but it is a supporting element of the overall mission nonetheless.

As the Afghanistan debacle has so dramatically and tragically illustrated, no amount of military “robustness” and professionalism on the part of international military forces can make up for the lack of a credible peace process. Recall the “whole of government” mantra repeated throughout Canada’s long Afghanistan military engagement: “There is no security without development and no development without security”. But the hard truth of the matter was there could be neither security nor development without ending the war and that, in turn, could not be achieved by military means but only through a comprehensive peace process.

The statistical evidence is clear: looking at all past wars of the last quarter-century, only 15 per cent have ended decisively on the battlefield, and in these cases the rebels prevailed at least as often as the governments they fought. All the rest ultimately had to be settled at the negotiating table.

Precisely because of the primacy of the peace process, today’s multi-dimensional UN peace operations — which involve military, police and civilian components — are much more than military operations charged with providing a safe and secure environment. The core of the effort comprises civilians mandated to facilitate the peace process, promote the rule of law, and support the establishment of legitimate and effective institutions of governance.

Increasingly mandates, like that for MINUSMA in Mali, also include security assistance to the elected government so it can reassert its authority nationwide. This military assistance is in concert with diplomatic and technical support for national political dialogue and reconciliation efforts.

For a collective enterprise of this magnitude to succeed — as UN peacekeeping does more often than not — the international effort must be perceived as legitimate and impartial. And it must have the broadest possible international support within a coherent legal and operational framework.

Only the UN Security Council (UNSC) can mandate such an operation and only the UN Organization can lead the mission if it is to be internationally acceptable. Headed by a civilian in the role of Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General (SRSG), with all the other components, including the military and police, reporting to him or her, the very structure of the UN peacekeeping mission reflects the centrality of the peace process. This stands in sharp contrast to NATO-led military missions, even where authorized by the UNSC to assist in stabilizing a conflict.

NATO-led stability operations lack the perceived legitimacy and impartiality of UN-led operations precisely because their political and military leaders are seen to represent a very specific set of powerful countries and interests. Not only does the separate military command structure undermine coherence in the international effort, NATO leadership constitutes a gift to spoilers on the ground decrying alleged “foreign occupation” - the presence of additional non-NATO forces notwithstanding.

An integrated mission under the overall authority of the SRSG also allows UN command and control to be decentralized to the operational level. This contrasts with the centralized, top-heavy and opaque command structure operating in NATO.

Many current UN missions may have comprehensive mandates to build sustainable peace but they manifestly lack the professional forces and equipment to provide the secure environment necessary for peace to take hold. The full potential of UN peacekeeping will not be realized until countries like Canada meaningfully re-engage.